



# Bruner on Development and Learning

The Main Selection

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**P**rofoundly influenced by the increasingly important work of Jean Piaget, Jerome Bruner and his associates have launched an intellectually provocative and remarkably comprehensive exploration into the development of human cognitive functioning. Also indebted to anthropological thought, **STUDIES IN COGNITIVE GROWTH** is especially valuable for its attempt to weave a significant interdependent pattern of man's innate intellectual capacities and the cultural forces which shape them and which often come to dominate them. "*Growth itself*," the authors maintain, "*is culture-bound*."

Of the book's 14 chapters, 11 are structured on a series of Piaget-like experiments, which refreshingly convey the excitement of intellectual discovery. The studies are set in a variety of cultural climates, and focus on the development of higher thought processes, such as abstract reasoning, and the quest for maximum information and clarity through the paring away of redundancy. These studies, by themselves, represent a powerful, cumulative contribution to the understanding of intellectual growth, and the book can be recommended on such merits alone. It is, however, the broader implications of the studies with which Bruner is concerned, and he uses their findings as an underpinning of his theoretical conception of growth as "instrumental conceptualism."

Bruner's conceptualism rests on the proposition that what is known of the world and, by extension and implication, which is loosely accepted as "self-evident truth," is actually rooted in an elusive model of reality, and one which "can only partially and intermittently be tested against input." Consequently, *unable to subject our perceptions to a consistently valid critical test, we are governed by ideas, axioms, and the philosophical mechanics of time and space, cause and effect, which are expressed primarily through language.* We have no choice but to accept them as valid, and, along the way, have come to revere the linguistic framework which seems to give "substance" to their abstract qualities.

Reality is represented and tested by three modes: *action, imagery, and symbolism*, which to a great extent communicate the values, thoughts, and semantic preoccupations of a given culture. The model which results is enforced by the culture because, in loose evolutionary terms, it has

served the culture adaptively over time. In turn, the members of the culture accept the reality model, and deal with it through the same three modes which gave rise to it. The individual, Bruner asserts, is free to develop his capacities, including his intellectual life, only within the permissible value system of the cultural boundaries. He grows by internalizing these culturally-loaded actions, images, and symbols, and, within societal constraints, enhances them or not.

Of great interest is the importance which Bruner consistently places on the use of language as an interpretive tool which subtly perpetuates cultural values. **STUDIES IN COGNITIVE GROWTH** points out that actions, images, and symbols are unacceptable as pure experiences. They must have linguistic, explicative counterparts; they must be communicable in words. Especially in a technological society, whose members constantly seek relationships among the three modes, what cannot be rendered in language, what cannot be abstracted, tends to be rejected. Stated simply, *what cannot be identified linguistically deviates from our determined model of reality*, and is not only rejected, but often labelled as "sick."

Throughout **STUDIES IN COGNITIVE GROWTH**, Bruner is immensely concerned with the educative process as a force and shaping factor of growth. Appropriately, the second volume of this dual selection is entitled **TOWARD A THEORY OF INSTRUCTION**, which is nontechnical in presentation, and is aimed at nonspecialists as well as educators and social and behavioral scientists.

**T**hough based on theory and experimentation, this is a practical book, whose goal is the initiation of a systematic means of constructing a theory of instruction. Bruner's eight essays have been deeply influenced by his own direct contact with teaching, curriculum planning, and teacher education. The essays frequently deal with the formal problems of communication and the pupil-teacher relationship. Even more important, however, is the fact that they whirl fresh air through an educational approach often as musty as many of our dilapidated school buildings, which have been guiltily transformed into shiny glass and ceramic monuments of "total" educational progress.

**TOWARD A THEORY OF INSTRUCTION** is a critique, but it is not a polemic or cliché-ridden phillipic. Bruner hopes to persuade, but he attacks with reason instead of outrage. He is pupil- and human-centered, and, in this respect, perhaps the most masterful chapter is *Man: A Course of Study*. Here, Bruner persistently dovetails practical teaching methods with the



child's necessity (and right) to learn to cope with his world, and to understand his humanity.

Bruner urges that students, from the beginning, be shown respect for the power of their intellects, so that they may apply this respect and the self-confidence which it engenders to their understanding of the human condition. Teaching must encourage them to analyze the nature of their social world and, most important of all, must *"leave the student with a sense of the unfinished business of man's evolution."*

**W**hat prevents these goals from fermenting into heady utopian wine is Bruner's consistent practical underpinning, and his demonstrations of how these humanistic ideas might be implemented. His appeal is not to cajolery, magic, ideologisms, or lectures, but rather to new involvements, new techniques, and a tough appraisal of the old.

Bruner regards, for example, the current educational emphasis on the child's "readiness" as an amorphous concept which implies a threshold across which intellectual power suddenly explodes, as well as an implicit assumption that teacher and pupil are helpless until this mysterious process occurs. The child's "readiness" must be cultivated, taught, and acknowledged in realistic contexts, without dependence on the realm of miracle.

Further, the author maintains that children rarely receive vital feedback; curriculum appraisal, instead of measuring the child's response in process, is too often a *post hoc* affair, doomed to perpetuate circular reasoning and error. And he finds, over the full spectrum of education, no consistent theory of instruction, but rather a reliance upon a body of maxims. He sees clearly that, despite so much educational "progressivism," the child is actually expected to be involved only minimally with what is being done to him five days a week.

A number of the ideas in **TOWARD A THEORY OF INSTRUCTION** such as the appeal to children's fantasies and the application of emotions to the learning process, are bound to repel and even anger certain educators. Others will undoubtedly find the stimulation and pedagogical fire they have sought for years.

**STUDIES IN COGNITIVE GROWTH** and **TOWARD A THEORY OF INSTRUCTION** are excellent companion volumes, representing a signal contribution to the field of theoretical and practical learning by one of America's most dedicated and brilliant psychologists.

*The Main Dual Selection:*

## **Studies in Cognitive Growth**

*by Jerome S. Bruner,  
Rose R. Olver, Patricia M. Greenfield,  
and others*

**and**

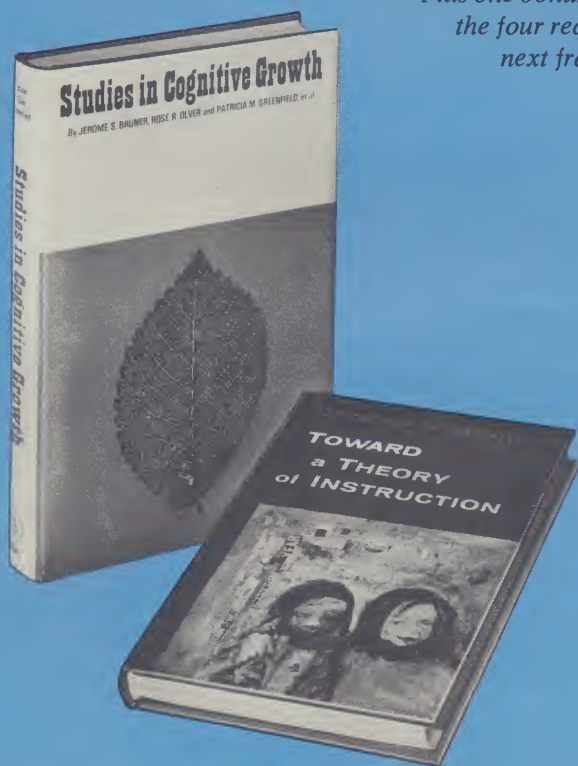
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**a statement by Jerome S. Bruner:**

*"One finds no internal push to growth without a corresponding external pull, for, given the nature of man as a species, growth is as dependent upon a link with external amplifiers of man's powers as it is upon those powers themselves."*

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